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Victoria Kelley

The Equitable Consumer: Shopping at the Co-op in Manchester

This article looks at the Manchester and Salford Equitable Co-operative Society in the period from the late nineteenth century through to 1914. Products, packaging, advertising and store design are considered in order to examine whether, and in what ways, co-operative ideologies were reflected in the experience of shopping at this particular co-operative society. It is suggested that in practice the co-op's design policy was increasingly influenced by commercial pressures from a competitive market-place, despite debates within the movement as to how its ideology should relate to issues such as advertising and store design. However, the conclusion is that this does not mean that more complex ideas and ideologies were absent from customers' experience of shopping at the co-op. In fact such ideas functioned alongside other considerations in the everyday purchasing decisions of the co-operative shopper in Manchester.

Keywords: advertising—consumption—co-operative retailing—Great Britain—Manchester—packaging

The last few decades have seen a marked improvement in the art of shopkeeping . . . the old fashioned dead front, plentifully supplied with brick and timber, embellished with small peeping panes, is a curiosity and decidedly a relic of the past . . . The modern shopkeeper and merchant, by combining art with the latest developments of science, have stimulated business and placed themselves in the forefront of enterprise.

R. J. Wilson (ed.), *The Co-operative Manager's Text Book*, 1905

Introduction

This article looks at the co-operative movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on the material culture of the movement, the products, packaging, advertisements and shops, and on the debates and issues surrounding this material culture [1]. Its core is a case study, the Manchester and Salford Equitable Co-operative Society, the dominant co-operative retailer in Manchester and a strong force in the commercial life of the city.

The Equitable was formed in 1858 by a group of friends who had attended Sunday school together, and opened its first store in Great

Ancoats Street, Manchester on 4 June 1859. By late 1860 a further five shops had been opened, and in 1864 a large and grand Central Stores, located a short distance from the city centre in Ardwick Green, had been completed [2]. By 1889 the society had twenty-one stores and over 11,000 members; in 1909, the year of the Equitable's fiftieth anniversary, the society's fiftieth branch was opened [3].¹

The Equitable was not remarkable in its rate of growth (indeed some co-operative societies grew considerably faster).² It was founded at a time when the co-operative movement was flourishing, following the lead of the Rochdale Pioneers, who established the ground-rules of co-operative retailing in 1844. Co-operative societies sprang up rapidly in the following decades, with 971 societies and 547,000 members by 1881.³ Between 1881 and 1900 membership tripled, and up to 1914 a further doubling of membership occurred.⁴ In Manchester the Equitable had to exist in competition with scores of private retailers in a busy and diverse metropolitan market. Unlike some of the co-ops of Lancashire's smaller and more homogeneous cotton towns, the Equitable did not dominate the local retailing scene.⁵ Nevertheless



1 'The Co-operative Commonwealth', engraving by Walter Crane

it was an important player—the city's largest single chain of grocers and only multiple draper up until the end of the period under discussion here.⁶ Sources on the Equitable abound and can be used to reconstruct a picture of co-operative shopping in Manchester at a period when the nature of retailing and consumption was undergoing rapid change.

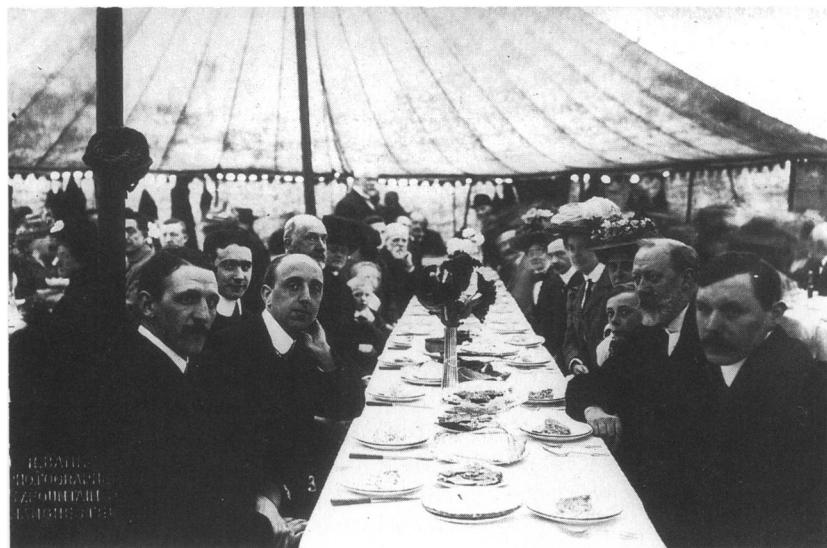
The latter part of the nineteenth century was a

time of increasing wealth, and increasing sophistication in the patterns of consumption of working-class people. The broad picture is one of rising standards of living amongst the urban working classes from around 1850 onwards.⁷ Although there were intermittent periods of slump, and widespread concern over the persistence of squalor and poverty for a substantial minority,⁸ for many people this period saw steady material improvement. Hand in hand with this went the growth of new forms of commerce: department stores became more sophisticated and appealed to a larger audience; and local and national chains of grocery stores such as Liptons and Home & Colonial sold an ever wider array of products, industrially manufactured or processed, and vigorously promoted.⁹

Since the seventeenth century, patent medicines had been branded, packaged and advertised in an effort to convince the public of the life-preserving powers of dubious pills and potions.¹⁰ The later nineteenth century saw the extension of this practice to very many more products. A well-known example is W. H. Lever's Sunlight soap, the first soap to be cut into small bars and packaged at the factory, giving scope for extensive advertising.¹¹ This process was repeated by other soap manufacturers and by the makers of many other products from whisky to flour to boot polish to pickles. Advertisements sprang up on railway stations, the sides of trams and horse-buses, and in the windows and on the counters of every shop. Whereas before consumer choice had been largely restricted to the middle and upper classes in their purchasing of fashionable goods, now such choice proliferated in the buying of humble foodstuffs



2 Masthead of the Equitable's *Herald* magazine, 1901, showing the society's Central Stores in Ardwick Green, Manchester



3 Members of the Equitable gather for a tea party at Belle Vue to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the society in 1909

and household comestibles such as soap or starch. Even those with very little to spend could exercise a preference, for Pears' soap over Sunlight, for Reckitt's starch instead of Colman's.

The period in which these developments took place also saw the rise of the co-operative movement as a major force in retailing. The historiography of retail co-operation has been dominated by those who judge it as a political movement, as part of the long struggle of the British working classes for political representation and economic equality. From this point of view co-operation has often been found wanting because it was felt to contribute to that 'quietism' which left-wing historians of labour have found so disappointing in the British proletariat.¹²

This perspective tends, of course, to emphasize co-operation's role in forming new approaches to the organization of production, dismissing its contribution to consumption. The earliest phase of the movement did indeed concentrate on production. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century co-operative communities such as those established by Robert Owen in Britain and the United States were primarily productive enterprises which aimed to provide employment and a living for members.¹³ Even those early societies which began as retailers usually had the overall aim of accumulating enough capital to set up co-

operative communities which would bypass and eventually supersede the injustices of early industrial capitalism.¹⁴ Most historians agree that the opening of a co-operative store by the so-called Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 was a significant turning point because it was the Rochdale principles which set up the idea of the dividend, sharing out the trading profit or 'surplus' on a regular basis to all who shopped at the stores in proportion to their purchases, rather than aiming to accumulate it to found a new community. Many historians have come up against the idea of the dividend, and stuck there, choosing to see this mechanism as the only possible explanation for co-operation's huge growth and popularity from mid-nineteenth century onwards. As one historian puts it, the dividend was 'the most valued part of co-operation. Ideals were all very well, but they were too costly for most co-operators to take too seriously'.¹⁵ In other words the change from early co-operation to the Rochdale system has been seen to equate to a change of emphasis from production to consumption, which in turn signalled a change from a truly radical political agenda to a rather modest form of working-class self-help which had no aims to challenge the existing economic order of nineteenth-century capitalism.

I propose to look at the co-op from a slightly

different angle, to suggest that the movement's role as a consumer organization can be given its due emphasis while still engaging with co-operation's political aims. This can be achieved by looking at certain contemporary debates amongst co-operative activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concerning issues such as advertising, and, more importantly, by examining the material culture of co-operative shops and products. Such a strategy will also, I hope, suggest ways in which we can go beyond the dividend in exposing a range of complex motivations behind the everyday purchases of co-operative shoppers; were ideals really too costly for these people? The bulk of my argument is constructed around empirical material, and the primary aim is to give this material a fair airing. However, I will round off this article by briefly suggesting how the theoretical work of a number of scholars in the fields of anthropology, cultural studies and social history may help or hinder the attempt to see the co-op differently. Such work can be extremely useful, but in view of restrictions on space, I have limited this part of my argument in order to foreground the archival evidence.

The Principles of Co-operative Retailing

The principles of the post-Rochdale retail co-operative movement were simple; members banded together, each making a small investment to provide the capital to open a store. The initial aim, in Rochdale and elsewhere, was to provide pure food at reasonable prices at a time when the poor were often victim to producers and retailers who sold adulterated goods at inflated prices. Any profit or 'surplus' left over from the running of the society was returned to members in the quarterly dividend, shared out in proportion to the amount spent at the store by each person.¹⁶ Many people relied on the dividend to pay for purchases such as new clothes or boots or left their share to accumulate from quarter to quarter to be drawn out in case of hardship caused by sickness or unemployment.

It has been noted that secondary literature on the co-op has frequently set up an opposition between production/ideals and consumption/pragmatism. This was also a strong trend in co-

operative thought in the nineteenth century. As the retailing societies expanded, all were keen to source as much of their stock as possible from co-operative suppliers. To this end the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) was established in 1863, rapidly growing into a huge business which imported, wholesaled and, from 1873, manufactured goods for sale to the local retail societies.¹⁷ This move was accompanied by heated debates as to how the principle of co-operation should be extended to the workers in the CWS factories—through a bonus for labour perhaps, or mass share ownership?¹⁸ Such debates were not really resolved until the mid-1880s, when the idea of large-scale profit-sharing was firmly rejected by the CWS, to the disappointment of a number of high-profile co-operative activists who had always seen the establishment of truly co-operative productive enterprises as the movement's real aim.¹⁹ On the whole co-operative ideology presented co-operative consumption and co-operative production as two sides of the same coin. Yet although the bulk of the rank and file played the role of consumers not producers, ideas about ultimate Utopian goals were influential, in forming attitudes to the material culture of co-operative society stores.

Many co-operative activists were extremely suspicious of the competitive methods of non-co-operative retailers. They saw their own task as providing honest goods at honest prices, and spurned fancy window displays, elaborate packaging, and advertising. Although the simple branding of goods was approved of (the initials CWS could be an effective guarantee of purity in the fight against adulteration), other promotional techniques were not. These, it was thought, not only manipulated customers into making unnecessary or unwise purchases, but also diverted money away from the dividend.

Such ideas stemmed from the early proponents of consumer co-operation—the Rochdale Pioneers and their supporters. In 1858 George Jacob Holyoake, propagandist of the movement and early historian of the Pioneers, described in idealistic tones a Saturday night at the Rochdale co-operators' Toad Lane headquarters:

Buyer and seller meet as friends; there is no overreaching on one side, and no suspicion on the other; and Toad Lane on Saturday night, while as gay as the Lowther arcade in London, is ten times more moral . . . The whole atmosphere is honest. Those who serve neither hurry, finesse nor flatter. They have no interest in chicanery.²⁰

Holyoake was tapping into an ancient and persistent strand in Western thought, one which saw material luxury as immoral and the blandishments of commerce which it brings as undesirable 'chicanery'. Such an attitude seems to have prevailed throughout the movement's first decades, but by the 1890s things were beginning to change. Faced with increasingly sophisticated competition from the growing grocery chains, a debate began to rage across the co-operative press, at annual congresses and in the pages of pamphlets. At issue was the question of whether the co-operative movement could afford to stand aloof from the practices of the market-place. Would members continue to shop at co-operative stores if such stores were shabby and ill situated, if co-operative products were dowdy and plainly packaged, and if the movement refused to advertise? A pamphlet written in 1903 by Scottish co-operator James Cheyne argues for change:

During the early days of our movement . . . the feeling prevailed throughout the length and breadth of the land that co-operation required no advertising . . .²¹

However:

The condition of things that obtained even twenty years ago is out of date to-day. There has sprung up around us a host of trained, capable merchants . . . Look around you to-day and you find in the commercial world men of enterprise, men with brains, men with ideas, men who are reaching past us, tapping the customers on the shoulder, and attracting their attention before *our* slow-going coach comes up.²²

Cheyne goes on to make comprehensive recommendations: co-operative societies should advertise, both in the co-operative press and in local non-co-operative newspapers; they should make their shops into standing advertisements by positioning them on the high street, not the back streets, of every town; they should fill their windows and shelves with co-operative goods;

and ensure that those goods are as high in quality and as attractive in presentation as those in any other shop. Another writer, published in the CWS's magazine the *Wheatsheaf*, justifies the adoption of commercial techniques as a purely defensive measure, 'as battleships are built by Christians'.²³

In Practice: the CWS and Advertising

Chasing such debates across the pages of newspapers and pamphlets is one thing, but it remains to be seen how these issues were expressed, if they were expressed at all, in the everyday activities of retail societies such as the Manchester and Salford Equitable, and in the experiences of their members.

All co-operative retail societies were independent, and functioned in different ways to suit local circumstances. In some of the towns of Lancashire, for instance, retailing was effectively dominated by the local co-ops. In crowded and bustling Manchester the Equitable did not enjoy such a position, and its managers were very conscious of the competition they faced in a large metropolitan market.

However although the Equitable was an independent organization, the service it offered its members was not wholly defined by the society's own policy. In particular, the Co-operative Wholesale Society had a significant impact on the experience of shopping in the society's stores because it supplied around two-thirds of the Equitable's stock in the 1880s and 1890s.²⁴ The presence of large quantities of CWS goods would have been a constant in co-op stores run by different societies across the country.

The CWS was founded in 1863 by a number of retail societies, including the Equitable, who wished to combine their purchasing power to get a better deal for their members. Manufacturing was added to wholesaling in 1873 with the opening of a biscuit factory at Crumpsall in Manchester, and by the 1890s the CWS had numerous factories turning out co-operatively made flour, pickles, jam, polish, boots, corsets, furniture and a host of other items. Many such products carried reminders of co-operative ideology: baking powder, custard powder and soap were named

'Beehive'²⁵ or 'Wheatsheaf',²⁶ both symbols of the mutuality of the co-operative movement which were also employed as logos in conjunction with other brand names,²⁷ as was a handshake motif.²⁸ Styles of boot were named 'Progressive' or 'J. T. W. Mitchell'²⁹ (after a hero of the movement), while biscuits from Crumpsall were not only branded and packaged with appropriately co-operative names and iconography, but were also individually stamped with the CWS's initials or 'co-operative, Manchester'.³⁰ How could anyone forget their co-operative principles when they ingested such reminders with their afternoon tea?

Yet despite such vigorous branding of goods with names and motifs which expressed co-operative ideals, by the 1890s, as we have already seen, there was widespread concern that the co-op was failing to promote its goods and its stores effectively in competitive markets. A number of letters in the pages of the co-operative press reveal one aspect of the problem, as co-operatively made goods were elbowed out of their own store windows by the products of private manufacturers:

Surely enough of artistic and attractive goods of Co-operative production can be got to dress a window so that it shall be attractive without giving the private trader a free advertisement at the expense of co-operation. Why show C.W.S. starch in conjunction with half a dozen rivals, or C.W.S. Cocoas with several other makers and advertisements? . . . Let our windows teach co-operation in all possible ways.³¹

In October 1897 the Equitable in Manchester came under attack for this offence in a letter in the *Co-operative News*. The correspondent examined the windows of his local branch and discovered that:

In only one were there any co-operative productions shown, namely some flour and pickles. For one bottle of co-operative pickles there were at least three non-co-operative. There was a large display of two cocoas in one window, with show-cards of two others, making four cocoas offered to members, but not one co-operative.³²

In this case the Equitable appears to be neither disdaining advertising altogether, as co-operation's early pioneers advised, nor advertising co-operative products 'as battleships are built by Christians'. Rather, the society seems to be giving non-co-operative products plentiful pro-

motion, while neglecting co-operatively made goods. A letter from the Equitable's president James Johnston explains some of the reasons why:

I wish to point out the difficulty of inducing the ordinary member of a co-operative society who is not always a co-operator, to purchase proprietary articles except those that are extensively advertised, and the CWS and other co-operative producers have not gone in for elaborate show-cards such as are sent out by the private traders to call special attention to their products.³³

Figures quoted by Johnston, and other statistics in the society's minute books, show that a very high proportion of the Equitable's goods were sourced from co-operative manufacturers, predominantly the CWS.³⁴ The presence of so many non-co-operative goods in the store window seen by the letter-writer was thus not representative of the stock of the shop itself, and is an interesting demonstration of the power of branding and advertising, and a vindication of those who called on the co-operative movement to advertise or die. In fact the CWS, the largest co-operative manufacturer, seems to have woken up to the problem caused by its lack of promotional efforts, and the following year (1898) started to provide point-of-sale advertising material in the form of show-cards, announcing in the *Wheatsheaf*:

In order to enable societies to make their shops bright looking without having to sacrifice their principles by displaying showcards of firms that compete with the C.W.S., we will send a selection of attractive showcards of our various productions. These have been specially designed and are beautifully printed. They will compare favourably with the best of those that at present usurp their place in so many stores.³⁵

Many of these advertising images produced by the CWS have survived, a few in the form of showcards,³⁶ others because they were also printed as advertisements in co-operative journals such as the *Wheatsheaf* (the CWS's own magazine), or the Equitable's monthly *Herald* [4]. They were used extensively by the Equitable, and can be seen prominently displayed in many photographs of the society's stores from 1898 onwards [5]. It has been seen that the brand names and packaging employed by the CWS frequently expressed quite clear co-operative principles. Branding was not



4 Advertisement for Irlam dry soap. (*Wheatheaf*, January 1908)

condemned by early co-operators because of its role in guaranteeing quality and purity. However, advertising was: would the Rochdale pioneers have approved of the CWS's foray into advert-

ising, or seen it as an unacceptable entanglement with the ways of private commerce?

If we examine a number of advertisements produced by the CWS, the most immediate impression they give is of a marked commercial competence, an assured use of the conventions and language of late Victorian and Edwardian advertising. Children with shining complexions or snowy white clothes demonstrate the benefits of toilet or laundry soap, an alluring flamenco dancer promotes Seville orange marmalade and a fat and jolly medieval monk is used to sell pickles.

However, closer examination does reveal a difference, if a subtle one, between the CWS's advertisements and those of some private companies. The essence of this argument concerns the closeness of the advertising rhetoric employed to the product it advertises. Thomas Richards, in his book *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, shows an advertisement for Pears' soap in which a group of African tribesmen look in incomprehension at the slogan 'Pears' soap is the best' painted across a desert rock. The image is topped by the words 'The formula of British conquest', which Richards calls 'perhaps the largest promise made by an advertisement in the nineteenth century'.³⁷ This may have been the



Shopping at the Co-op in Manchester

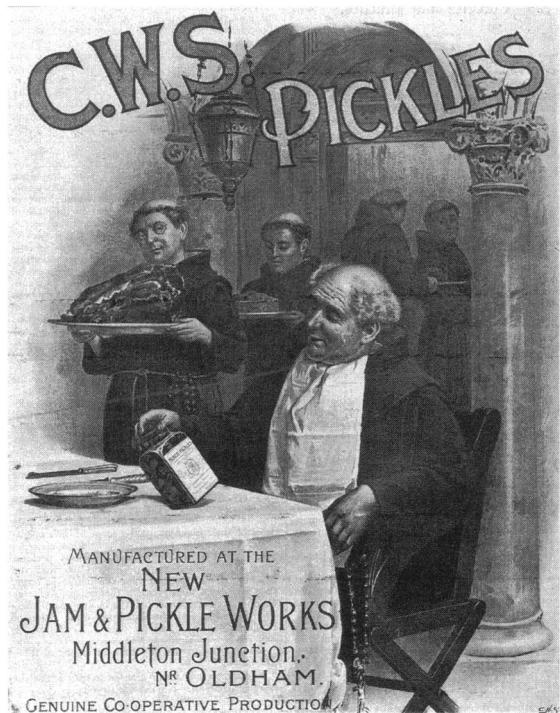
5 Great Ancoats Street branch, a new store built in 1907 to replace the society's very first branch, which opened in this street in 1858. Note the electric light fittings hanging down inside the window, and the poster advertising a concert, as well as framed CWS showcards. (*Herald*, February 1908)

largest promise but others were not far behind in attributing to the commodities they advertised all sorts of powers beyond those normally expected of them. In other advertisements the effect is heightened by the marshalling of *spectacular* images, representations of the spectacle which Richards identifies as the defining property of the new commodity culture, in advertisements themselves. Richards gives the example of another advert for Pears' soap, in which the vast expanse of the White Cliffs of Dover is daubed with a huge slogan, that claims, simply and trivially, that 'Pears' soap is for the skin and complexion'.³⁸ Such examples, extreme representatives of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advertisements, were a strand which it seems that the CWS was keen to avoid.

The CWS advertised, using a visual rhetoric which did not immediately distance it from the producers in the capitalist sector. However, it did keep its advertising language very close to the qualities of the product in question. What distinguishes co-op advertisements is the lack of big claims and fanciful ploys. That is not to say that

fantasy or the exotic were ruled out, as long as they had a reasonably strong link with the product. For instance, the advertisement for CWS pickles which depicts a fat medieval monk sitting down to a supper of roast beef is a historicist fantasy which is nevertheless clearly related to modest claims about co-operative pickles being tasty and nourishing [6]. Thus although CWS advertisements do not employ a different language from those of non-co-operative manufacturers, they do seem to avoid the extremes of this language, keeping rather aloof from the fiercest cut and thrust of the commercial world.

The more extreme claims of other advertisers were mocked quite clearly in an article in the *Wheatsheaf* in 1892. The author states drily that CWS Irlam soap 'will not confer complexions like velvet, nor bestow a delicate softness upon the horny palm of the navvy, nor amiability upon him who washes with it on rising.' However, Irlam soaps will 'do all that soaps can do, and do it in a thorough, straightforward manner.'³⁹ Further scorn was expressed in an advertisement of 1901 which is an obvious pastiche of Pears' famous 'Bubbles' advertisement [7–8]. In the co-op version, instead of John Everett Millais's wistful blonde cherub in velvet and curls, we have a cheerful little boy in plain clothes who imitates 'Bubbles' with his clay pipe and bowl of soapy water as his brothers and sisters look on and laugh.



6 Advertisement for CWS pickles. (*Wheatsheaf*, May 1898)



7 Pears' soap 'Bubbles' advertisement, based on a painting by John Everett Millais

vived complaining about or praising the Equitable's shops and goods.

One letter exists written by a member in the suburb of Gorton, to the general manager of the society in 1892, and signed 'a shareholder'. This is a detailed critique of one suburban shopping centre, and compares the Equitable's branches in Gorton directly to the private shops which competed with it. The picture outlined correlates very closely to the situation we have already seen—a retailing boom with smart new shops (in this case many belonging to small local chains) and increasing customer choice. In comparison the local branch of the co-op appears shabby and poorly stocked, with low-quality butcher's meat and no greengrocery on offer. The correspondent calls for the opening of a co-operative greengrocers, and makes it very clear how important smart shop fittings are in the increasingly competitive shopping streets of Gorton:

You have two houses next to the grocer's. What is there to prevent you converting these into a first-class greengrocer's, fitted up regardless of expense, in a



8 Advertisement for CWS Irlam soaps, poking fun at Pears' famous 'Bubbles' advertisement. (*Wheatsheaf*, June 1901)

very attractive style. But it must be roomy, nothing cramped or stuffy about it. Gorton is fully alive to these details, in proof of which, just look at the advance which has been made during the past four months, in Cross Street. Look at the style of the new fishmonger's, and the new baker's. And they have drawn custom too.⁴⁰

Thus we have the clearest evidence of how the co-op was under threat from sophisticated private retailers. The CWS responded in the later 1890s with showcards and advertisements, and the Equitable responded with a concerted attempt to refurbish and modernize its shops.

The evidence for this is plentiful but oblique. Nowhere in the minute books of the Equitable is there an entry which records a decision to adopt such a policy—the minute books are terse and factual, and record small practical decisions, not

debates and discussions and long-term policies. However, from the late 1890s onwards they are littered with resolutions regarding the refurbishment of shops, in particular the fitting of new shop windows, and the installation of electric lighting.⁴¹ Glass and light technology, associated as they were with the brightness and visibility so lacking in the cramped, dark shops of a generation before, were the key symbols of modernity in late nineteenth-century retailing,⁴² and the Equitable seems to have adopted them as its signal to the 'shareholder' of Gorton and its other members that it aimed to embrace the up-to-date techniques of its private competitors.

Surviving photographs of the Equitable's stores show this modernization. Early shops, built in the 1860s or 1870s, had windows divided up into a number of smaller panes.⁴³ Later shops have large plate glass windows. An example is the Ladybarn branch,⁴⁴ built by the society in 1900, which had plate glass stretching up to about nine feet off the ground, with a band of decorative stained glass above [9]. The Equitable's shops in Barlow Road (1903)⁴⁵ and Rusholme (1903)⁴⁶ have virtually identical large windows—the beginnings of the emergence of a corporate identity? All three of

these shops were purpose-built by the Equitable, and would probably have had electric lighting from the outset, but the minute books also record the refurbishment of existing shops, which were fitted with plate glass windows and electric lights in the very late 1890s and in the 1900s. Although by no means all the Equitable's shops were modernized in this way, the references are frequent enough clearly to imply a conscious policy. One particularly lavish branch was that opened by the Equitable in Moseley Road in 1910. It comprised a grocer's and a butcher's shop and was positioned on a corner site, with a sharply curving run of plate-glass windows. A photograph in the *Herald* showed the Equitable's local members attending the new shop's opening, which was accompanied by speeches, competitions, races and tea [10].⁴⁷

As well as updating its shops, the Equitable also made efforts to secure its custom in other ways. Like the CWS, it began to advertise, though not until 1911. By 1914 the society was a regular advertiser in the *Altrincham Guardian* and *Knutsford Guardian* newspapers and (taking advantage of a whole new medium) on the screens of seven local cinemas.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that there was

9 Ladybarn branch. (*Herald*, September 1901)





10 Equitable members dressed in their best attend the opening of the Moseley Road branch.
(*Herald*, August 1910)

some friction between the Equitable and the CWS on advertising policy—the CWS seems to have been unwilling to pay for advertising space in the Equitable's *Herald* magazine.⁴⁹ Its policy as a whole appears to have been to steer clear of advertising in non-co-operative media⁵⁰ (showing residual distrust of commercial methods?), whereas the Equitable, perhaps more in touch with the realities of the market-place, had no such qualms by 1914.

The Contribution of Theory

So far the story told, based on empirical research, is a fairly simple one—modern co-operative retailing began in the 1840s, reacting to the hardships of an urban poor just emerging from the first stages of the development of a modern industrial economy. Its primary aims were simple—the provision of basic foods of a reasonable quality at reasonable prices—and its ideals were high—direct, though non-confrontational, opposition to the profit motive of capitalism. However, as the industrial economy matured and began to develop into a consumer society, the co-op found that its markets were increasingly threatened by the promotional techniques of retailers serving a spirit of consumerism which was beginning to embrace classes previously kept on its margins. The co-op reacted by adopting such techniques, more or less wholesale, rejecting only

some of the more extreme practices. Does this signal a selling-out of the essence of co-operation, a betrayal of the spirit of early co-operators? And what does it say about the motivations and principles of co-operative consumers who needed such modern shops and bright packages to keep them loyal? It could be argued that these developments support the arguments of those who claim that co-operative shoppers were only in it for the dividend—principles meant nothing but material concerns, including smart shops and a good 'divi', were persuasive.⁵¹

This line of argument would see the approach of the early co-operators, with their rather puritanical dislike of visual display and apparent luxury and the commercial wiles of advertising, being overturned by later developments in which the co-operative movement embraced commercial practice in order to survive and flourish. However, aside from the fact that there were numerous visual codes to co-operative identity in the 1890s (e.g. beehives and wheatsheaves in packaging and advertising) it could also be suggested that the co-operators of the 1890s, as opposed to the 1850s, were not selling out to mammon, but rather using a more complex material code to express ideologies which were just as strong as those of previous generations.

This is where more theoretically based work on consumption may be useful. Several writers have noted that consumption tends, historically and in

much modern writing, to be demonized as a symbol of greed and venality in the material world which is necessarily harmful to spiritual values: 'there is obloquy for merchandising and guilt in ownership'.⁵² Such ideas have been passed down in Western thought from early Christian teachings and have raised their heads in many forms through the centuries. This tradition sees the consumer as weak, preyed upon and exploited by wily shopkeepers and purveyors of luxury. However, as Rachel Bowlby has noted there is another view of the consumer which occasionally emerges—this is the strong and assertive consumer, the Thatcherite consumer who in recent years 'has become the paradigm for ethical and political choice'.⁵³

Unfortunately these two views of the consumer are polarized in the extreme, and both tend to caricature. Bowlby herself has used a combination of literary sources and psychoanalytical techniques to look at nineteenth- and early twentieth-century retailing and produce a persuasively described version of the consumer-as-dupe. In her work on the relationship between women and the developing commercial culture, women are forced into a sexually stereotyped straight-jacket: "masculine" and "feminine" dispositions were constructed in terms of oppositions between work and leisure, rationality and emotion, practicality and the "instinct" for beauty.⁵⁴ Similar territory is covered and a similar line taken in Elaine Abelson's work, which sees women department store customers in the nineteenth century as victims of commercial manipulation, leading to an outbreak of kleptomania.⁵⁵

Such a view echoes the views of early co-operators, and reflects fears which were very common in the explosion of consumerism which occurred in the later nineteenth century. Rosalind Williams in *Dream Worlds* has explored how these fears were examined and debated by French intellectuals and activists, amongst them leaders of the French co-operative movement.⁵⁶ Unfortunately Williams' discussion is all of theoretical debates, not of actual consumer behaviour. However, an impressive and persuasive attempt to find a way to analyse actual behaviour comes in Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods*. This starts by explaining quite clearly

how economic theory has conspicuously failed to explain the nature and the patterns of consumer demand, despite the fundamental part such demand plays in the market. Economic histories fall into the same trap, whether dealing with co-operation or with other aspects of the late nineteenth-century retailing revolution.⁵⁷ Douglas and Isherwood also point out that the dichotomy of 'rational' and 'irrational' consumption (equivalent to the 'good' and 'bad' or 'assertive' versus 'manipulated' model) is a gross over-simplification and a hindrance in analysing consumer behaviour, because it is based on an artificial and impossible distinction between things which are useful physically and those which have psychic roles. Having cleared away these points, they then go on to suggest ways in which consumption can be explained. While some of their proposed techniques are tentative, their work does have the great virtue of suggesting that most people's consuming behaviour, whether it is in a traditional society or a modern consumer one, conforms to a very complex pattern. Consumer goods are used as a sort of language, which both arises from but also helps to articulate social structures, and which facilitates communication: 'try . . . the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a non-verbal medium for the human creative faculty'.⁵⁸

This approach may help us to make sense of the co-op. Instead of the (superficially) uncomplicated puritanism of the early co-operators, or the view which insists on seeing consumption as something vaguely 'rational' in economic terms and therefore cannot see beyond the dividend as the motivation of co-operative consumers, we have a strategy which allows that consumers may behave in a complex manner and which does not try to distinguish between 'rational' and 'irrational' consumption.

Co-operative consumers like the Equitable's 'shareholder' of Gorton, were using a language of consumption which was more developed than that of early co-operators, but no less or more inspired by principle, no more or less 'tainted' by materialism. By the turn of the century working-class living standards had risen, providing more opportunity to demonstrate ideas and ideals through one's material life. Good clothes and

plentiful food were not an exercise in vanity or indulgence, but a symbol to the world of respectability and steadiness. Paul Thompson describes an oral history interview with Frank Benson, whose parents were keen members of the Bolton co-operative society in the early years of this century. Smart clothes were important in this family—there were clogs for everyday, but proper shoes for Sundays, and every year at Whitsun all the children would have new clothes. Frank knew where he was placed in society, both from the district where he lived, and from comparing his clothes with those of his school-fellows—‘we thought ourselves as the respectable working class; we were a little bit above the labouring class . . . And we were taught to make the best use of every halfpenny or penny that came into the house.’ This making the best included making merry, especially at Christmas when there were presents, sweets, a good dinner and aunties and uncles visited for high tea and singing around the piano. Perhaps such festivities (which Douglas and Isherwood refer to as ‘marketing services’) would have been paid for from the quarterly dividend. Two or three nights a week Frank Benson’s father would teach children’s classes at the local co-op, on the ‘history and principles of the Co-operative movement’.⁵⁹

If having a certain basic standard of material well-being was important, so purchasing the relevant goods at a smartly fitted-up and modern shop could equally be evidence of self-reliance, and a source of pride. Drawing a regular dividend at the end of the quarter was similar direct evidence of a thrifty, well-ordered lifestyle, in contrast to the string of petty debts at private shops which could be its antithesis. It fitted alongside co-operative principles and was certainly not in opposition to them, as some co-operative historians have asserted.⁶⁰ Peter Gurney has noted that the success of the dividend is often seen as being incompatible with the idealistic aspect of co-operation, but that such an idea falsely assumes ‘the separation of ideals and material interests, of heads from bodies’:

of course the dividend was itself an ‘ideal’ despite the fact that it put food in working-class bellies and clothes on working-class backs. Was it not likely that

many rank and file members gradually recognised that profit-making was unnecessary or even immoral after they had traded at the store for a while? We cannot say for sure but this would help explain the fierce loyalty generated by the movement.⁶¹

Conclusion

Melanie Tebbutt in her history of pawnbroking⁶² has explored the complex ways in which the poorest classes deployed their income, in times of plenty converting spare cash into objects such as new clothes, watches or furniture, things which could be enjoyed for their own sake, but which were also a useful symbol of the financial stability necessary for community networks of credit and mutual support, and could easily be converted back to ready cash at the pawnbrokers in case of dire need. Paul Johnson has written in a similar vein, in an article which is much more sensitive and less narrow than his pronouncements on the unique attractions of the co-operative dividend quoted earlier.⁶³

Both these historians are concerned with the poorest levels of the working classes, whereas the Equitable’s customers in Manchester were almost certainly slightly better off, a little more respectable. Would they not deploy material goods in equally imaginative ways, tapping into the systems of representation which the developing consumer culture was beginning to offer, without losing sight of co-operative ideas as a result. The Equitable’s monthly *Herald* had a circulation well in excess of 6,000 copies per month between 1889 and 1904.⁶⁴ It contains just such a mix of messages; frequent exhortations to buy co-operative, to embrace thrift, to use one’s purchasing power to get a better deal for the producer as well as the consumer, are run alongside articles on new fashions for Whit week, ideas for Christmas presents from the stores, and advertisements for new co-operative brands of cakes or boots. Similarly CWS products bought by the Equitable’s members carried wheatsheaf and beehive symbols, its advertisements claimed ‘of genuine co-operative manufacture’ yet packaging and promotion was all couched in the visual language of late Victorian and Edwardian commercial culture.



11 'The Woman with the Basket'—the visionary consumer who was the symbol of the Co-operative Women's Guild. Engraving by Muirhead Bone, used on the Co-operative Women's Guild membership card from 1908

The Equitable's stores were decked out with showcards and advertisements for a variety of CWS products, yet mixed in with these were notices for co-operative lectures or meetings of the Women's Guild to discuss 'progressive' topics such as the cruel fashion for feathers on hats or the campaign for maternity benefit [11]. We see mixed signals, mixed messages that surely inspired in the Equitable's customers mixed (but not necessarily contradictory) motivations. In the *Herald*'s words: 'When you put on your bonnet to go shopping, be sure to put on your thinking cap at the same time.'⁶⁵

VICTORIA KELLEY
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Notes

- 1 *Herald*, fiftieth anniversary souvenir history edition, 1909.
- 2 G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation*, George Allen & Unwin for the Co-operative Union, 1944, p. 213.
- 3 Johnstone Birchall, *Co-op: the People's Business*, Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 65.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 5 See John Walton, 'Co-operation in Lancashire 1844–1914', in *North West Labour History*, issue 19, 1994/95, pp. 115–25 for an overview of co-operation in the region.
- 6 *Slater's Manchester, Salford and Suburban Directory*, Slater's Directory Limited and Kelly's Directories Limited, editions for 1890, 1894, 1896, 1898, 1900, 1902, 1904, 1906, 1908, 1910 and 1914.
- 7 See Roderick Floud & Donald McCloskey, *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, for a good round-up of recent work on the standard of living question.
- 8 See Charles Booth, *The Life and Labour of the People of London*, 1902 and Seeböhm Rowntree, *Poverty: a Study of Town Life*, Macmillan, 1901.
- 9 W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market*, Macmillan, 1981.
- 10 Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Penguin, 1982, p. 295.
- 11 Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
- 12 E.g. John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, 1974, pp. 221–2 and G. D. H. Cole quoted in Paddy Maguire, 'Co-operation and crisis: government, co-operation and politics, 1917–1922' in Stephen Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*, Routledge, 1988, p. 189. See also Peter Gurney, 'Heads, hands and the Co-operative Utopia: an essay in historiography', *North West Labour History*, issue 19, 1994/95, pp. 3–23.
- 13 Birchall, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–23.
- 14 P. Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in the Nineteenth Century*, Batsford, 1973, pp. 181–2.
- 15 Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 143.
- 16 Gosden, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–4.
- 17 Percy Redfern, *The Story of the CWS: the Jubilee History of the Co-operative Wholesale Society*, CWS, 1913, pp. 75–6.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 79–82.
- 19 Birchall, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–7.
- 20 George Jacob Holyoake, *Self-Help by the People: the History of Co-operation in Rochdale*, Holyoake & Co, 1858, p. 39.

- 21 James Cheyne, *Co-operative Advertising*, Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society, 1903, p. 4.
- 22 Ibid., p. 4.
- 23 *Wheatsheaf*, February 1909, p. 121.
- 24 General Board minute books 1885–1898 give weekly figures for stock purchases; 65.5 per cent came from the CWS and a further 25 per cent from other co-operative manufacturers.
- 25 E.g. *Herald*, July 1900, p. 101.
- 26 E.g. *Wheatsheaf*, September 1898, title page.
- 27 E.g. CWS Crumpsall biscuit factory *Christmas Catalogue*, 1901, p. 21.
- 28 E.g. Robert Opie, *The Art of the Label*, Simon & Schuster, 1987, p. 95.
- 29 *Wheatsheaf*, November 1899, p. 68.
- 30 CWS Crumpsall biscuit factory *Christmas Catalogue*, 1901, p. 45.
- 31 *Wheatsheaf*, September 1897, p. 36.
- 32 *Co-operative News*, 16 October 1897.
- 33 *Co-operative News*, 30 October 1897.
- 34 Johnston gives a figure of nearly 90 per cent for the proportion of grocery stock sourced from co-operative sources, with slightly lower figures for other departments, the *Co-operative News*, 30 October 1897. See note 24 for figures from minute books.
- 35 *Wheatsheaf*, December 1898, p. 94.
- 36 Three such showcards are in the possession of the CWS in Manchester, in a collection of co-operative ephemera gathered together by Mr Bernard Howcroft.
- 37 Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, Verso, 1990, p. 121.
- 38 Ibid., p. 250.
- 39 *Wheatsheaf*, August 1892, p. 21.
- 40 Letter dated 30 November 1892, loose document tucked inside cover of Finance Committee minute book 1888–1892.
- 41 E.g. the Finance Committee minute book reports ‘new windows’ for the Salford branch on 25 November 1897, and ‘a complete installation of electric light’ for the Stretford Road branch on 16 July 1906.
- 42 Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-thieving: Middle-class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 65.
- 43 E.g. Hyde Road, built by the Equitable in 1880, photograph in the *Herald*, October 1908; Denmark Road, built by the Equitable between 1886 and 1889, *Herald*, January 1902; Gorton, built 1867, *Herald*, July 1908.
- 44 Ladybarn, photograph in the *Herald*, September 1901.
- 45 Barlow Road, photograph in the *Herald*, September 1903.
- 46 Rusholme, photograph in the *Herald*, September 1903.
- 47 *Herald*, September 1910, p. 190.
- 48 Finance Committee minute book, 1911–1914, minutes of meeting, 8 September 1914.
- 49 Report from Mr Wright, general manager, dated 10 October 1901, loose document tucked inside cover of General Board minute book 1901–1902.
- 50 Redfern, op. cit., p. 221.
- 51 It should be noted that what evidence there is indicates that the cost and quality of goods sold by the Equitable was directly comparable to those of private competitors, so we can tentatively rule out this factor in people’s choice between the two. See, for instance, minutes of meeting, 14 August 1891, Finance Committee minute book 1888–1892 and Manager’s report dated 1 February 1904, Grocery Committee minute book 1903–1906.
- 52 Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, first published 1979, Routledge, 2nd edn., 1996, p. vii.
- 53 Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, Routledge, 1993, p. 2.
- 54 Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, Methuen, 1985, p. 11.
- 55 Abelson, op. cit.
- 56 Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-century France*, University of California Press, 1982.
- 57 E.g. James B. Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain 1850–1950*, Cambridge University Press, 1954; Peter Mathias, *Retailing Revolution: a History of Multiple Retailing in the Food Trades Based upon the Allied Suppliers Group of Companies*, Longman, 1967.
- 58 Douglas & Isherwood, op. cit., pp. 40–1.
- 59 Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: the Remaking of British Society*, first published 1975, 2nd edn., Routledge, 1992, pp. 107–9.
- 60 Johnson, op. cit., p. 143; Gosden, op. cit., pp. 184–5.
- 61 Gurney, op. cit., p. 15.
- 62 Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working Class Credit*, Leicester University Press, 1983.
- 63 Paul Johnson, ‘Conspicuous consumption and working class culture in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1987, pp. 27–42.
- 64 *Herald*, March 1905, p. 43.
- 65 *Herald*, January 1896, p. 12.

Contemporary Journal and Manuscript Sources

Herald: the Manchester and Salford Co-operative *Herald*, published monthly by the Equitable from 1889.

- Wheatsheaf*: the Co-operative Wholesale Society's monthly magazine.
- The minute books of the Manchester and Salford Equitable Co-operative Society, held in Manchester Central Library:
- M473/1/1/10-22: General Board minute books 1885-1914
- M473/1/2/3-11: Finance Committee minute books 1885-1914
- M473/1/3/2-8: Drapery Committee minute books 1885-1914
- M473/1/6/1-3: Grocery Committee minute books 1903-1914
- M473/2/1 & 2: Quarterly Reports and Balance Sheets 1896-1914